

# The Just So Story—Obvious but False

*Public opinion and entire theories of teaching reading are based in the false Just So story—Just Sound Out, and you can read.*

Frank Smith

It's obvious, isn't it? You just sound out letters, and you read. C-A-T spells *cat*, right?

That is what my neighbors say when the topic of teaching reading comes up. It's what newspaper columnists, politicians, and publishers of educational tests and instructional materials seem to believe. And it's what large numbers of self-professed experts want every teacher to believe.

I call it the Just So story—Just Sound Out, and you can read.

But the Just So story is false. This isn't just my opinion; it *has* to be false, logically and linguistically. Many teachers know that it's false, though they're not allowed to act on that knowledge. Sometimes they can be sanctioned for even talking about it.

Just So may seem obvious, just as it is obvious that the earth is flat, the sun travels round the earth, and flying machines will take off only if they flap their wings like birds. Obvious, but false.

The public's belief in this story can only be undermined by deep and critical thought, which is not evident in most casual conversations, media dis-



cussions, political pronouncements, and educational planning. People whose minds are already made up don't need to think about something that is obvious. My neighbors have other things on their minds, and rarely hear an opposing point of view. Challenges to unconsidered beliefs may provoke emotional reactions ranging from defensiveness to hostility, even among friends.

Journalists, politicians, and educational experts and administrators

may have a lot more at stake, including their jobs. Entire theories of teaching reading are based on the Just So story. How do you persuade people it is false when it is not in their interest even to think about the possibility?

They must be shown that (1) sounding out is a handicap, not a help, to reading; and (2) there is a better alternative.

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## SOUNDING OUT IS A HANDICAP

The primary reason why sounding out doesn't help anyone is that it is unreliable. There are too many alternatives and exceptions. Every letter of English can represent more than one sound (or silence), and every sound of English (including silence) can be represented by more than one letter. There are over 300 ways in which letters and sounds can be related. These are the "rules of phonics" that sounding-out advocates expect children to learn in order to "decode" written words into sound.

C-A-T is not necessarily *k-a-t*. We only think C-A-T is "cat" because we know how the word *cat* is spelled. Therefore it's obvious. C can also be *s* (city), A can be *uh* (about) and T can be *ch* (picture), so C-A-T could just as easily spell *such*.

Everybody knows words that are "spelled irregularly." They include most of the words in the English language. Entire poems have been written highlighting such words. It would be difficult to write a poem using words that *aren't* exceptions.

This isn't a matter of picking exceptions to show that sounding out is unworkable. On the contrary, exceptions (like c-a-t) must be selected to try to show that sounding out works. In the trade, it's called *decodable* text. Try reading some; it's not real English.

The probability is that you'll make at least one mistake in reading *any* (annie?) English word if you rely on sounding out letters. That's why computer programs that "read" English text aloud do so by recognizing entire words (or syllables by default) rather than individual letters. Reading by sounding out is impossible.

The brain has no time to decode letters to sounds when you read, and even less when you are trying to learn to read. And the purpose of

reading is not to produce sounds of words, but to understand their meaning. Readers must understand what they are reading before they can read aloud. Try reading aloud language you don't understand. And incidentally, sounding out doesn't help you spell, either. Peepul hoo rite werds the weigh thay sownd ar the werst spelerz.

It is frequently asserted that phonics must be right because it is "based on research." No research has ever demonstrated that children can learn to read solely by being taught to sound out—that would be cruel and unnatural treatment—though millions have learned without recourse to sounding out at all. The effect of phonics instruction is often tested on real or made-up "words" that are easily sounded out, which is no test at all.

## THERE IS A BETTER ALTERNATIVE

Readers can't read just by decoding letters to sounds, and children don't learn to read in that way; they read by recognizing words. Learning to recognize thousands of words on sight is not a problem. We can all recognize thousands of different faces and objects. It is easier to learn to distinguish printed words than it is to distinguish faces and objects. In fact, most people read languages that have no letters. It

English, and certainly hearing-impaired children learn to read.

Many English-speaking children learn to read before they are exposed to sounding out, and most children only understand sounding out once they can read. Reading itself doesn't usually confuse children, even when they are learning, but sounding out is so confusing that its proponents have had to invent a new disease to explain why so many children don't understand it: lack of "phonemic awareness."

Children who have difficulty with sounding out, they say, lack the ability to hear the sounds of spoken words properly. But oddly enough, that doesn't prevent such children from understanding spoken words. They don't hear the word "cat" as "such." In the end, this "disease" only strikes children who can't make sense of the instruction, and it is cured by learning to read.

So why are there letters of the alphabet? It's a long story that has nothing to do with readers or writers. Letters were devised to allow scribes and printers to break written words down into replicable units and they facilitate the use of keyboards. Letters are an easy way of talking about words; they help us organize directories and lists. It's an historical accident that we've got them. They're not necessary for reading or for writing.

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doesn't take Chinese speakers any longer to learn to read their nonalphabetic languages than it does for English speakers to learn to read

We can read because we have learned to recognize the shapes of words, and we can write because we have become familiar with and can

remember spellings (we're not always correct, of course, but sounding out won't cure that).

This doesn't mean that the best way to learn to read and write is by studying lists of words. That would be as foolish as listing in advance the words an infant is to be taught every day when learning to talk. Words are not learned by rote, one at a time, when they are as meaningless as letters. They are learned when they make sense.

Children learn to recognize written words in stories that are interesting and comprehensible to them. At the beginning, they need someone to read to them, or with them, but very soon the act of reading itself makes new words familiar and recognizable. Every word learned is a convenient package of clues for recognizing other words. Some children even succeed in learning to read without adult assistance, helped no doubt by the pictures that accompany interesting stories and other texts.

But whether children learn quickly or slowly, with minimal assistance or with considerable labor, it is only by reading that they learn to read.

They have to become familiar with the look of written words, not with their sounds.

So why is a fallacious story so popular, apart from being so obvious? A significant reason in the politics and economics of the education industry is that sounding out can be reduced to small steps, prepackaged in instructional materials, dealt out one bit at a time, and tested and monitored every step of the way. With sounding out, teachers and students can be publicly "held accountable" for learning. Without sounding out, teachers have to be trusted to exercise their professional expertise and judgment. One could build an even stronger argument, of course, citing masses of linguistic and educational evidence, books, professional articles, and research. But people aren't persuaded to change their minds by being assailed with evidence. If anything, that aggravates them.

Persuasion is a psychological challenge. Just watch the way advertisers do it. People must feel open and comfortable, interested, and not defensive. Don't tell them they're wrong; tell them there's a better

way, a different story that could solve problems for them. Tell them this *matters*, and that they could change lives. We're not talking about abstract theories, but about how children are treated in school, and whether they are helped or handicapped.

Suggest that people try to read aloud just by sounding out letters (as opposed to recognizing entire words). Better still, suggest they observe children and teachers to see whether sounding out or the alternative creates the least confusion.

Some people will never be convinced. We have to live with them. But their inability to look beyond the obvious doesn't mean they should dictate how children are taught to read.

### Author Biography

**Frank Smith** is a Canadian writer and researcher living on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. His latest book is *The Glass Wall: Why Mathematics Can Seem Difficult* (2002, Teachers College Press).

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